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ABSTRACT

Possessed of an extraordinary strength of character and a wealth of public virtues, George Washington exhibited integrity, self-discipline, and a devotion to duty that made him the natural leader in the task of nation building. This booklet on Washington is one in a series on Revolutionary War soldiers who later signed the U.S. Constitution. The booklet reviews his life prior to the Revolutionary War, his service as commander of the Continental Army, his public service after the War, and his presidency. Personal data about Washington and a bibliographic essay of further readings are also included. (DJC)

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George Washington

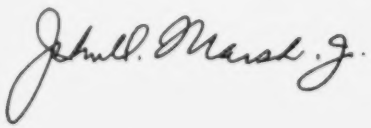
2

Soldier–Statesmen of the Constitution
A Bicentennial Series

Introduction

In September 1987 the United States commemorates the bicentennial of the signing of the Constitution. Twenty-two of the thirty-nine signers of the Constitution were veterans of the Revolutionary War. Their experiences in that conflict made them deeply conscious of the need for a strong central government that would prevail against its enemies, yet one that would safeguard the individual liberties and the republican form of government for which they had fought. Their solution is enshrined in the Constitution. The President of the United States is the Commander in Chief of the nation's military forces. But it is the Congress that has the power to raise and support those forces, and to declare war. The Founding Fathers established for all time the precedent that the military, subordinated to the Congress, would remain the servant of the Republic. That concept is the underpinning of the American military officer. These twenty-two men were patriots and leaders in every sense of the word: they fought the war, they signed the Constitution, and they forged the new government. They all went on to careers of distinguished public service in the new Republic. Their accomplishments should not be forgotten by those who enjoy the fruits of their labors. Nor should we forget the fortieth man whose name appears on the Constitution. The Secretary was the twenty-third Revolutionary veteran in the Convention, who continued his service to the nation as one of its first civil servants.

This pamphlet was prepared by the U.S. Army Center of Military History with the hope that it will provide you with the background of a great American; stimulate you to learn more about him; and help you enjoy and appreciate the bicentennial.



John O. Marsh, Jr.
Secretary of the Army

GEORGE WASHINGTON
Virginia

Among the Founding Fathers, the man who presided over the Constitutional Convention most clearly embodies the classic concept of the soldier-statesman. Just as George Washington was the architect of victory in the Revolution, so too, as the first President, he was the key figure in establishing essential political precedents to ensure the success of the new Republic. Even to his contemporaries, Washington seemed larger than life. Possessed of an extraordinary strength of character and a wealth of public virtues, he exhibited an integrity, self-discipline, and devotion to duty that made him the natural leader in the task of nation building.

Rising above the interests of class and section, Washington made a strong, viable union his goal. In a very real sense, he personified the emerging spirit of nationhood in the newly independent colonies. His support for a strong central government undoubtedly reflected his military experience, both as an officer in the Virginia militia and as the commanding general of the Continental Army. Indeed, the thirteen years that Washington spent on active service—more than a quarter of his adult life—were a singular devotion to public duty by a prosperous, eighteenth-century landowner. The practical experiences provided by this lengthy military career furnished Washington with a sure grasp of the political, economic, and military advantages to be gained from an effective central government. His unwavering support of this concept, and his understanding of the importance of political compromise, were essential to the success of the Constitutional Convention.

THE PATRIOT

A younger son in a family of the landed gentry, Washington appeared destined by birth and education to a career as farmer and land surveyor. But the death of his older brother in 1752 abruptly changed his life. It opened the way to his obtaining Mount Vernon, a large plantation on the Potomac, and to his succeeding his brother as one of Virginia's four adjutants responsible for militia training. Sworn in as a major of militia in February 1753, at the age of 21, he volunteered for active duty some ten months later.

Washington entered military service just as the lengthy rivalry for empire between England and France was reaching its climax in America. If the

colonists had appeared indifferent to some of the larger aspects of this conflict between traditional European enemies, their desire for expansion and their fear of alliances between the French and the Indians made them increasingly opposed to a continued French presence in North America. Virginia in particular was incensed when the French established a series of forts in the West. Reacting to this threat, Lieutenant Governor Robert Dinwiddie sent the young Washington to deliver an ultimatum to the intruders. When diplomacy failed, Dinwiddie ordered out a force of 300 colonials under Washington to defend English claims to the "Forks of the Ohio," where the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers join to form the Ohio (now Pittsburgh). Washington promptly led his men into what would become the first engagement of the French and Indian War. He won a preliminary skirmish before being captured by superior French forces some 50 miles south of his objective.

Widespread criticism, especially among the English after his release, only seemed to strengthen Washington's resolve. He served as a volunteer aide in 1755 to Major General Edward Braddock when the British sent a large force of regulars to capture Fort Dusquesne, the French stronghold recently erected at the Forks of the Ohio. Although the Braddock expedition met defeat on the banks of the Monongahela, Washington's display of courage and tactical skills in battle caused his personal reputation to soar. A grateful Dinwiddie subsequently placed him in charge of Virginia's frontier defenses. He commanded the colony's regiments and separate ranger companies (both perpetuated in today's 116th Infantry, Virginia Army National Guard), as well as its mobilized militiamen. In 1758 Washington became a brigade commander, the only American to achieve that rank during the war.

The French and Indian War served as a training ground for the leaders of the American Revolution. From his experiences in the field Washington came to understand the key role played by discipline, "the soul of an army," as he later called it. He also learned that tactics and formations had to be adapted to terrain. Perhaps most important for his future, he came to realize that the able leader pays close attention to administrative detail, learns how to make do with limited resources, and seeks to foster the welfare of his men.

Resigning his commission in 1758, Washington devoted the next fifteen years to his expanding agricultural enterprises. He also began to acquire political skills, emerging as a moderate leader of the opposition to English colonial policy. By 1774, however, Virginia's opposition to the mother country had hardened, and Washington, always loyal to his colony, joined in supporting the revolutionaries. He accepted the leadership of the volunteer militia and represented Virginia in the Continental Congress.

Oil on canvas, by Gilbert Stuart (c. 1795-96), National Gallery of Art.

THE SOLDIER

The Continental Congress quickly took advantage of Washington's military experience. Following the fighting at Lexington and Concord, it appointed him to various committees handling military matters, and on 15 June 1775 his fellow delegates unanimously elected him "General and Commander in Chief" of all Continental forces. Washington accepted the assignment only out of a profound sense of duty, refusing any salary. For eight years, the longest American war before Vietnam, he led the main elements of the Continental Army in combat while also carrying out the broader responsibilities of the Revolution's senior military officer.

The two sides adopted different strategies in the war. The English concentrated on occupying urban centers and seeking set battles. Washington put his emphasis on preserving his forces, believing the Revolution could succeed only if he kept his Army intact. He therefore bided his time, avoiding major defeats and acting decisively when the chance for surprise arose. Trenton and Princeton, in the winter of 1776, were memorable victories in a bleak campaign. In 1777 General Horatio Gates won the battle of Saratoga, and France entered the war on the American side, thus offering Washington the prospect of an allied offensive. In the interim, he employed his main force to neutralize the English army in New York, while nibbling away at the

enemy's strength and resolve in other areas, principally in the South. When French naval superiority off the Virginia Capes offered the opportunity for victory, Washington struck swiftly, defeating the British at Yorktown in 1781.

Washington had overcome massive obstacles in pursuing this strategy. After organizing and training the Army, he had met the challenge of holding it together as a professional fighting force during the dark days of defeat. At the same time, he had to placate a demanding Congress and jealous state governments, improvise to offset shortages in material support, curb his sometimes impulsive subordinate commanders, and deal with allies. Only a soldier endowed with extraordinary foresight, personal integrity, and self-discipline could have provided the necessary leadership. The claim can be made that without Washington the Revolution would not have succeeded.

At war's end, Washington promptly dismantled his victorious Army and once again became a private citizen. These actions astounded European observers, who fully expected the victorious general to seize power in the independent but unorganized colonies. Such assessments overlooked Washington's strong belief in the subordination of the military to civilian authority. He had made his position clear in March 1783 when a petition urging the Army to force Congress to restore back pay had circulated among the officers at Newburgh, New York. Washington recalled his own sacrifices in the service of his country and reminded his officers that their loyalty should be to their country, not to the Army. To dramatize the point, he fumbled through the first paragraph of his prepared remarks, donned glasses, and commented that not only had he grown gray in the service of his country but now he was also going blind. He then proceeded to denounce the petition as treason. The chastised officers meekly dispersed.

THE STATESMAN

Washington, his personal finances in shambles, returned to Mount Vernon in 1783 to resume his agricultural and business interests. But his absence from public life proved brief. The course of government under the Articles of Confederation convinced him that a stronger central authority was essential if the political and economic promises of independence were to be realized. His active participation in the drive for a stronger union of the thirteen states sprang in part from his fascination with the potential of the West, an interest born during his youthful days as a surveyor in the Shenandoah Valley and as an officer in the French and Indian War. To promote the development of the Potomac River Valley, he hosted a conference between officials from Virginia and Maryland at Mount Vernon in 1785.

This meeting led to a convention in Annapolis the next year and, finally, to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787.

The delegates unanimously elected Washington president of the Constitutional Convention. He proved uniquely suited to the task, his presence lending prestige and dignity to the proceedings. He also served as an important unifying force in the deliberations. Under his judicious guidance the Convention reached the many compromises necessary to achieve a more perfect union and wrote the provisions that would provide for a strong central government. Ratification of the Constitution led in time to Washington's inauguration as President in New York City in April 1789.

Once in office, Washington tried to transform the promises of the Revolution and the Constitution into realities. Applying experiences gained in commanding the Continental Army, he set about the task of organizing and molding a new central government. With quiet authority, he balanced the competing factions coalescing around two of his subordinates, Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. He dealt with the demands of the Congress with typical restraint, respecting its legislative prerogatives but never hesitating to exercise his presidential powers. In foreign affairs he insisted on strict neutrality in the continuing Anglo-French conflict; in economic matters he supported measures to strengthen the stability of the new nation. He secured the West through military actions and international treaties. He also jealously defended the authority of the federal government, quickly calling forth state militia forces to suppress the Whiskey Rebellion, a flouting of the excise tax laws by farmers in western Pennsylvania. Always a precedent-setting leader, he established a critical final one when he refused to accept a third term.

Washington's stirring Farewell Address to the country not only cautioned against sectional differences and foreign entanglements but also encapsulated his philosophy of government. In relinquishing the reins of power for the last time, he reminded his fellow citizens that "the Unity of Government which constitutes you one people is also now dear to you. It is justly so; for it is a main Pillar in the Edifice of your real independence, the support of your tranquility at home; your peace abroad; of your safety; of your prosperity; of that very Liberty which you so highly prize."

The Congress shall have Power . . .
To raise and support Armies . . .;
To provide for organizing, arming, and disciplining, the Militia . . .;

ARTICLE I, Section 8.

Personal Data

BIRTH: 22 February 1732, at "Wakefield," Westmoreland County, Virginia*
OCCUPATION: Planter
MILITARY SERVICE:
Virginia militia officer—5 years
Commander in Chief, Continental Army—8½ years
PUBLIC SERVICE:
Continental Congress—1 year
President of the United States—8 years
DEATH: 14 December 1799, at "Mount Vernon," Fairfax County, Virginia
PLACE OF INTERMENT: Mount Vernon

*In 1752 the English-speaking world adopted the Gregorian calendar, thereby adding 11 days to the date. Thus Washington's date of birth was recorded in 1732 as 11 February.

Further Readings

Douglas S. Freeman's *George Washington: A Biography* (7 vols., 1948–57) and James T. Flexner's *George Washington* (4 vols., 1965–72) provide a comprehensive picture of the man and his times. Both works have also been skillfully compressed into one-volume editions, which are specially useful for the general reader. Marcus Cunliffe's *George Washington: Man and Monument* (1957) provides a short account by a British scholar, while Esmond Wright's *Washington and the American Revolution* (1957), Don Higginbotham's *The War of American Independence* (1971), and Robert K. Wright, Jr.'s *The Continental Army* (1983) concentrate on his role as Commander in Chief. Other books shedding light on the role of the soldier-statesmen in the Constitutional Convention and the early history of the republic include Sol Bloom's *The Story of the Constitution* (1937), Gordon Wood's *The Creation of the American Republic* (1969), and Richard Kohn's *Eagle and Sword* (1975). Washington's papers are housed in the Library of Congress.

Cover: *Scene of the Signing of the Constitution of the United States*, by Howard Chandler Christy, courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

CMH Pub 71-1